

Appraisal of the Implementation of Early Childhood Education in Owerri Education Zone I of Imo State, Nigeria

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Abstract: *This study is an Appraisal of the Implementation of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria. The study adopted the descriptive survey research design. Two hundred and four respondents were used from selected fifty-one public primary schools in Owerri Education Zone I of Imo State. The instrument used for the study is the "Early Childhood Education Implementation Assessment Questionnaire (ECEIAQ)". The data obtained was analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The findings revealed that the pre-primary section of the public primary schools in Owerri Education Zone 1 in Imo State is developed to a great extent; and that the head teachers and pre-primary classroom teachers agreed that government developed curriculum for pre-primary schools are used for teaching and learning. It also showed that public pre-primary schools are regularly supervised by government educational authorities. Based on the research findings, the following recommendations were made: Government should maintain frequent supervision of the pre-primary sector of our education system for continuity and effectiveness. Government should empower NERDC to develop more curriculums and teachers' guide for early childhood education and ensure they are used for teaching and learning in pre-primary schools.*

I. Introduction

The indispensability of early childhood education as the basis for the development of cognitive, affective and psychomotor potentials needed in adult life cannot be overemphasized. Hence, it is said that a child should be trained in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it. This is because naturally, anything that is tender is easily amendable and shaped unlike anything that is old or hardened. Anderson (2002) opines that early childhood education instills in the children a critical inquiring mind, basic communication skills, sociality and necessary physical ability needed to guide them in adulthood.

Early childhood education refers to the education which provides the pre-school child with physical health, nutritional well-being, and intellectual capabilities. It also enhances the child aesthetic, emotional and social development in a semi-formal education setting outside the home (Nakpodia, 2011). It is the foundation of the education of the child as it represents the first important step in achieving the goals of education. Mishra (2008) submits that early childhood education refers to a wide range of programmes all aimed at the physical, cognitive and social development of children before they enter primary school. The Federal Republic of Nigeria in the National Policy on Education (NPE), holds that early childhood education is the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. It includes the crèche, the nursery and the kindergarten (FRN, 2004). The crèche is for children between 0-2 years. Nursery is for children between 3-4 years while kindergarten is for children between 3-5 years. Therefore, in an attempt to ensure that every Nigerian child receives adequate early childhood education, the Federal Government of Nigeria through the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004 integrated early childhood education into the existing public primary schools (UBE, 2004).

The objectives of early childhood education in Nigeria as outlined in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004:11) are as follows:

- To effect a smooth transition from home to the school;
- To prepare the child for the primary level of education;
- To provide adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the market, offices etc);
- To inculcate social norms;
- To inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, the environment, art, music, and playing with toys;
- To develop a sense of co-operation and team spirit;
- To learn good habits, especially good health habits, and
- To teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc. through play.

In order to ensure the effective and efficient actualization of the objectives of early childhood education in Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004) holds that government shall:

- establish pre-primary sections in existing public primary schools and encourage both community/private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education;
- make provision in teacher education programmes for specialization in early childhood education;
- ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community;
- ensure that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play and that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented to achieve this;
- ensure the development of appropriate curriculum for pre-primary education in Nigeria;
- supervise and control the operation of pre-primary education.
- the teacher-pupil ratio shall be 1:25;
- set and monitor minimum standard for early childcare centers in the country; and
- ensure full participation of government, communities and teachers' associations in the running and maintenance of early childhood education facilities.

Some of the major issues raised in the objectives of early childhood education in Nigeria, according to the National Policy on Education are supervision, curriculum, language of immediate community, and the establishment of pre-primary sections in existing public primary schools.

Supervision is an intervention that is provided to ensure adequate actualization of a set goal. It is evaluative and extends over time. It is tailored towards ensuring that educational institutions operate efficiently within the legal requirements and rules (Adox-Okujagu, 2010). The aim of supervision in education is to make sure that both head teachers and classroom teachers are doing what they are supposed to do and that students are receiving the best education possible. In education, supervision is carried out at different levels. For instance, students are supervised by the classroom teachers, the classroom teachers are supervised by the head teachers while the entire school activities are supervised by supervisors from the Ministry of Education or any other body.

Curriculum is the plan guiding knowledge acquisition in school settings. At the early childhood level, the curriculum is non-formal. Thus Ejie (2006) posits that the childhood curriculum includes; alphabets, numbers, nursery rhymes, coloring and story time. The curriculum is one of the foundational elements of effective schooling and teaching. The childhood education curriculum provides the platform for a life-long learning. It is developed based on the principles of children's development and learning (Agusiobo, 2001). Thus, any adequate early childhood education curriculum takes into cognizance the four developmental objectives in the curriculum framework of early childhood development. The four developmental objectives are physical, cognitive and language, affective and social as well as aesthetic development. A study by Amali, Belo and Okafor (2012) found that government showed little commitment and support for pre-primary education in Kwara State. They found out that schools used no official curriculum and the standard of resources in the schools fall short of the standard stipulated in the National Policy on Education.

The objectives of early childhood education are implemented by the primary school head teachers and pre-primary school classroom teachers. The primary school head teacher is the most senior teacher of a primary school. The head teacher is responsible for the day to day management of the pre-primary section of the public primary school. Head teachers are in-charge of monitoring the work of the pre-primary school classroom teachers. As custodians in their respective schools, the head teachers keep important school records such as the teachers' attendance and children's assessment reports. The overall responsibility for the school, its staff, pupils and the education they receive lies with the head teacher. The early childhood care givers or the pre-primary school classroom teachers are the implementers of the early childhood curriculum. Thus, the pre-primary school classroom teachers are saddled with the responsibilities of planning, organizing and conducting activities to help the pre-primary school children to develop a wide variety of skills. Besides teaching the basics of numeracy, literacy, music and art, the teachers also encourage the promotion of the pre-primary school pupils' social, emotional and intellectual development.

The pursuance and realization of the objectives of early childhood education in Nigeria will provide the children with the required critical cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills needed to effect a smooth transition from the linkage classes to the primary school level. Viatonu, Usman-Abulqadri and Dagunduro, (2012) stated that majority of the children found in the public Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centers are three years and above while provision is made for all categories of children in private schools. The curriculum of a typical nursery school, as opined by Ejie, (2006) includes alphabets, numbers, nursery rhymes, colouring, story time and in some cases rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic. However, Tombowua (2013) asserts that the basic curriculum provisions of national policy on pre-primary education are as follows:

- The rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes etc, should be taught in pre-primary institutions through play.

- The medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community.

The pre-primary education curriculum, as enshrined in the National Policy on Education, is comparable to those used in developed countries of the world (Akinware, 2010). Mindes (2007) submits that early childhood education implementation is filled with challenges which have continued to undermine the actualization of its objectives. Such challenges include: ineffective planning and implementation of programmes, accountability and mismanagement of scarce resources as well as shortage of qualified early childhood care givers. In addition, Onu, Obiozor, Agbo and Ezeanwu (2001) hold that facilities and equipment for early childhood education programme implementation are generally inadequate in public primary schools.

Quality in early childhood education, according to Olaleye and Omotayo (2009) means ensuring that children are cared for in a safe and nurturing environment where they are presented with learning activities. Thus, in appraising the quality of early childhood education, such factors like the group size, number of children per care giver and physical features (playground, facilities and toys) are considered (Quality Counts, 2002). Also, Olaleye and Omotayo (2009) state that quality indicators in early childhood activities are physical environment and evaluation of children's progress. The assessment of these indicators is crucial in order to determine the quality of early childhood education being exposed to the children. Curtis (2000) posits that quality assessment is an important part of any educational programme which helps to determine whether the programme is effectively implemented. Though by the virtue of the UBE Act of 2004, pre-primary schools have been integrated into the public primary schools. Amali, Belo and Okafor (2012) hold that pre-primary education in the public primary schools is poorly implemented.

The researcher during a field work in Owerri Municipal Council found out that some of the public primary schools within the Municipal Council are ill-equipped for pre-primary education. Specifically, the researcher found that in some public primary schools, the pre-primary school classroom teachers were not professionally trained childhood educators. The fieldwork also revealed that adequate preparations for a smooth take-off of early childhood education were not made in terms of the provision of recreational facilities and instructional materials. Similarly, Olaleye and Omotayo (2009) found that the quality of the preprimary school teachers was low in Ekiti State. Similarly, Abdulrahman (2012) posited that nothing is practically, seriously and operationally happening in most public primary schools in response to the provisions of the policy and UBE Act, 2004. Also Abdulrahman (2012) found out that the early childhood curriculum developed by NERDC is not widely in operational. As a result, the dearth of the national curriculum for pre-primary education had compelled proprietors and childhood care givers to resort to curricular of their choice.

It is against this background that this study is aimed at appraising the implementation of early childhood education programme in public primary schools in Owerri Education Zone 1 of Imo State.

II. Statement of the Problem

Early childhood education is targeted at developing the cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills needed for a smooth transition from the linkage classes to the primary school level. When children are exposed to quality early childhood education, they develop superior communication skills, necessary physical ability and sociality needed in adult life. Most importantly, the acquisition of the skills and needed physical ability required later in life is achieved through a well implemented quality early childhood education. The researcher during a field work in Owerri Municipal Council found out that some factors responsible for the poor implementation of the programme in public primary schools within the Municipal Council in Imo State. They include:

- a. lack of qualified teachers;
- b. ill-equipped classroom and lack of instructional materials;
- c. lack of supervision by officers responsible for this;
- d. lack of well-developed curriculum for pre-primary education.

III. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to appraise the extent to which the implementation of the early childhood education programme in public primary schools is carried out in Owerri Education Zone I of Imo State. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. findout if there are qualified teachers for the implementation of early childhood education in Owerri Education Zone I of Imo state.
2. findout if there are well equipped classrooms and instructional materials for the implementation of early childhood education in Owerri Education Zone I of Imo state.
3. find out the extent to which public pre-primary schools are supervised by the government in Owerri Education Zone I in Imo State.
4. findout the extent to which the developedpre-primarieschool education curriculum by the governmentare properly utilized in Owerri Education Zone I of Imo State.

Research Questions

The following research questions have been raised to guide the study:

1. Are there qualified teachers teaching in pre-primary schools for the implementation of the pre-primary school curriculum in public primary schools in Owerri Education Zone 1 of Imo State?
2. To what extent are the public pre-primary schools supervised by the government in Owerri Education Zone 1 of Imo State?
3. To what extent is developed curriculum by the government for pre-primary schools are being utilized in public primary schools in Owerri Education Zone 1 of Imo State is being used?

IV. Methods

Design of the Study

The design adopted for this study was descriptive survey research design. The population of the study consisted of all the head teachers and the pre-primary school classroom teachers in the 254 public primary schools in Owerri Education Zone 1 of Imo State, which consists of five local government areas. 51 public primary schools were randomly selected from 254 public primary schools for the study. The sample for the study was 204 respondents (51 head teachers and 153 pre-primary school teachers) which were randomly selected from the 51 selected public primary school used for the study.

The instrument used for data collection was the Early Childhood Education Implementation Assessment Questionnaire (ECEIAQ). The questionnaire contained twenty-five items constructed on a four point Likert scale model of: very great extent, great extent, little extent, and very little extent. The following scores were assigned to each scale of measurement: very great extent – 4 points, great extent -3 points, little extent – 2 points and very little extent – 1 point. This was used to elicit information from the head teachers and the pre-primary school teachers.

The instrument was validated through distribution of copies to experts in childhood education, and in Measurement and Evaluation in the Faculty of Education University of Nigeria, Nsukka, for scrutiny. This was done to evaluate the content of the instrument as well as the extent to which the items in the instrument measure what they were designed to measure. Based on their advice and comments, some items in the instrument were modified and restructured. This covered the face and the content validity. After a trial testing of the instrument using Cronbach alpha, a reliability index of 0.88 was obtained which implied that the instrument is reliable for data collection. The copies of the instrument were administered to the head teachers and pre-primary classroom teachers in the 51 randomly selected public primary schools directly by the researcher and 3 research assistants who were pre-primary school classroom teachers. The copies were collected as soon as they were completed.

The Mean (\bar{x}) and standard deviation were used to analyze the data obtained from the field.

V. Result And Discussion

Research Question 1

Are there qualified teachers teaching in pre-primary schools for the implementation of the pre-primary school curriculum in public primary schools in Owerri Education Zone 1 of Imo State?

Table 1: Analysis of Research Question One

S/N	Items	Head teachers			Classroom Teachers		
		X	SD	D	X	SD	D
1.	There are qualified teachers to teach the pre-primary school section of my school.	3.61	18.63	VGE	3.72	36.70	VGE
2.	There are no enough teachers to teach pre-primary school section of my school.	1.45	7.30	VLE	1.32	11.40	VLE
3.	There are professionally trained teachers for crèche (children between 0-2 years) and nursery (children between 3-4 years) in my school	2.76	10.81	GE	2.86	20.84	GE
4.	There are professionally trained teachers for kindergarten (For children 3-5 years) in my school	2.86	12.39	GE	3.65	35.33	VGE
5.	The teacher-pupil ratio is above 1:25	2.43	8.77	LE	3.24	26.49	GE
	Cluster mean	2.62		GE	2.96		GE

Table 1 revealed that the head teachers and classroom teachers agreed to a very great extent to item 1 with mean responses of 3.61 and 3.72 respectively. The head teachers and classroom teachers agreed to a great extent to item 3 with mean scores of 2.76 and 2.86 while on item 2, they agreed to a very little extent. However, the head teachers and classroom teachers varied on their responses to items 4 and 5. The cluster mean of 2.62 for head teachers and 2.96 for classroom teachers showed that both the head teachers and classroom teachers agreed to a

great extent that teachers teaching pre-primary school education curriculum are qualified for the implementation of the curriculum in Owerri Education zone 1 of Imo State.

Research Question 2

To what extent are the public pre-primary schools supervised by the government in in Owerri Education Zone 1 of Imo State?

Table 2: Analysis of Research Question Two

S/N	Items	Head teachers			Classroom Teachers		
		X	SD	D	X	SD	D
6	Supervisors come from the State Primary Education Board (SPEB).	2.73	10.51	GE	3.05	22.77	GE
7	The adequacy of the play- ground is checked.	2.49	8.97	LE	2.35	15.03	LE
8	Teachers attendance is checked	3.12	14.03	GE	3.63	33.94	LE
9	The safety of the school is assessed	2.47	9.19	LE	2.88	20.61	GE
10	The teachers' performance is assessed	3.04	12.58	GE	2.44	16.09	LE
	Cluster mean	2.77		GE	2.87		GE

The data on Table 2 showed that the head teachers and classroom teachers agreed to a great extent to item 6 with a mean score of 2.73 and 3.05 respectively. Also they agreed to a little extent to item 7. On item 8, 9, and 10, there were variations in their agreement. However, the Cluster mean of 2.77 for the head teachers and 2.87 for the classroom teachers showed that they both agreed to a great extent that the public pre-primary schools are supervised by the government in Owerri Education Zone 1 of Imo State.

Research Question 3

To what extent is developed curriculum by the government for pre- primary schools are being utilized in public primary schools in Owerri Education Zone 1 of Imo State is being used?

Table 3:Analysis of Research Question 3

S/N	Items	Head teachers			Classroom Teachers		
		X	SD	D	X	SD	D
11	I know about the national childhood education curriculum	2.55	10.29	GE	2.78	20.31	GE
12	The national childhood education curriculum is not used in my school.	2.80	12.23	GE	3.37	32.89	GE
13	The children are basically taught in line with the national curriculum.	1.73	6.44	LE	2.37	33.41	LE
14	The school curriculum does not have childhood education concept in it	2.82	10.96	GE	2.63	17.98	GE
15	The school's curriculum covers all aspects of early Childhood education	2.14	7.24	LE	2.04	17.21	LE
	Cluster mean	2.41		LE	2.64		GE

Table 3 revealed that both the head teachers and classroom teachers agreed to a great extent to items 11, 12, and 14 with mean scores of 2.55, 2.80, 2.82 and 2.78, 3.37, 2.63 respectively. Also, on item 13 and 15, both the head teachers and classroom teachers agreed to a little extent. Interestingly, the head teachers had a Cluster mean of 2.41 while the classroom teachers had a Cluster mean of 2.64. Therefore, while the head teachers agreed to a little extent, the classroom teachers agreed to a great extent that curriculum developed by the government for pre-primary schools is being utilized in Owerri Education Zone 1 of Imo State.

Discussion

The extent to which teachers are qualified for teaching in pre-primary schools

The results of research question one showed that the pre-primary section has been established to a great extent in the public primary schools in Owerri Education zone 1 of Imo State. Teachers engaged for pre-primary schools were qualified and competent. However, the teacher-pupil ratio to a great extent is above 1:25 as recommended by FRN (2004). The findings agrees with the studies conducted by Viatonu, Usman-Abdulqadri and Dagunduro (2012) who submitted that majority of the children found in public ECCE centers are three years and above.

The extent to which public pre-primary schools are supervised by the government

The results of research question 2 showed that both the head teachers and pre-primary classroom teachers agreed to a great extent that the public pre-primary schools are supervised by the government. This finding differs from the outcome of the studies conducted by Bagudo (2008), Tombowua (2008) and Abdulrahman (2012) who found that there was inadequate supervision of the pre-primary section of the public primary schools in Owerri Education zone 1 of Imo State.

The extent to which government developed curriculum for pre-primary education was utilized

The findings of research question 3 show that the head teachers and pre-primary classroom teachers agreed to a little extent that the government developed curriculum for pre-primary schools is being utilized for instruction in Owerri Education zone 1 of Imo State. This is consistent with the findings of Abdulrahman (2012) which found that the early childhood curriculum developed by NERDC is not widely in operational. Also a study by Amali, Belo and Okafor (2012) revealed that public pre-primary schools in Kwara State used no official government-developed curriculum.

VI. Conclusion

The extent of implementation of early childhood education in Nigeria cannot be toyed with, especially in the present quest for technological advancement and digitalization. Based on the results of the findings, teachers teaching in the pre-primary schools are qualified for the implementation of the pre-primary education curriculum. Also, the pre-primary sections of the public primary schools are to a great extent supervised by the government. The government developed curriculum for pre-primary education is inadequately utilized in public pre-primary schools in Owerri Education Zone 1 of Imo State.

VII. Recommendations

1. Government should make it a point of duty to begin to monitor and supervise the already established pre-primary section of our educational programme.
2. Government should empower NERDC to develop more curriculums and teachers' guide on early childhood education and disseminate them to all schools for proper implementation.
3. Parents and teachers should be more proactive in supporting government efforts towards realization of objectives of pre-primary education in Nigeria.

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